

Michel Houellebecq and the Theological Virtues

Abstract:

The controversial contemporary French author Michel Houellebecq is generally regarded as anti-religious. His works explore the implications of postmodern, capitalist-dominated culture. I argue that, particularly in *The Possibility of an Island*, Houellebecq in fact offers resources for thinking constructively about religion in postmodernity. Particularly, Houellebecq explores the themes of faith, hope, and love. I suggest that Houellebecq's discussion of the theological virtues has Augustinian resonances. Through a close reading of *The Possibility of an Island*, I explicate what Houellebecq has to say about the theological virtues, and I begin to consider broader implications of Houellebecq's work.

When the *New York Times* sent a reporter to the home of Michel Houellebecq to profile the author, through a haze of smoke and alcohol Houellebecq soon suggested that the female journalist should consider a role in an erotic film he was working on. This bluntness, disregard for convention, *chutzpah*, and seduction characterize Houellebecq's novels as well as his life (or at least persona). In 1998, with the publication of *The Elementary Particles*, Houellebecq rocketed from obscurity, fixing computers by day and writing poems by night, to literary superstardom, in France and internationally. That novel sparked a ferocious debate in the French press and amongst the literati, and it narrowly lost the prestigious Prix Goncourt (it won the Prix Novembre). Houellebecq's seduction has been effective: *The Elementary Particles* sold more than 300,000 copies, and the generally flattering *New York Times* profile noted, "About the only thing the French seem to agree on about Houellebecq is that he is the first French novelist since Balzac whose work captures the social realities of contemporary life" (it also noted that he is "considered by turns a pornographer, a Stalinist, a racist, a sexist, a nihilist, a reactionary, a eugenicist and a homophobe").¹

At first, Houellebecq appears to be a supremely post-Christian writer. In the worlds of Houellebecq's novels, capitalism (with its attendant secularism, liberalism,

commodification, and, most of all, atomism) is on the verge of complete global conquest. His novels seem to accept the advance of capitalism more with gusto than with any antipathy – and certainly not with any resistance. Traditional religious beliefs are consistently described and portrayed as “stupid.” Houellebecq himself has courted controversy – and been put on trial – for his inflammatory remarks about Islam.² Other world religions fare little better in his writings and remarks.

This widely accepted characterization of Houellebecq’s work and personal stance has led him to be treated more as an exemplar of late capitalist excess and nihilism than as a writer with anything theologically fruitful to say.³ John Milbank, for instance, characterizes Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles* as a “brilliant” example of the erotic contradiction characteristic of modernity. On the one hand, our erotic desires are commodified and their fulfillment is limited; on the other hand, modernity proclaims “formal freedom” and a “right” for us to act as we please. The pursuit of sex is like the pursuit of wealth: everyone in a capitalist society has the right to pursue it, but it is also scarce. Milbank concludes, “Modernity cannot accept that our strongest physical desire is hostage to the gift of another, and that in a fallen world a true trysting with *eros* may require at times, or even in cases all of the time, a sacrificial foregoing if we are not to betray others and ourselves.”⁴ In other words, on Milbank’s view, by pushing modernity to its extreme, Houellebecq exposes its contradiction and thereby opens the space for the Christian alternative (that Milbank advocates) to gain traction.

Given this reception, it is perhaps counterintuitive to look to the writings of Houellebecq for an account of the theological virtues. However, particularly in Houellebecq’s most recent novel, *The Possibility of an Island*, but also with less

emphasis in his earlier works, Houellebecq is explicitly concerned with faith, hope, and love. This newest work also has a much more ambivalent stance towards the role of religion in a culture that has succumbed to capitalism than Houellebecq's earlier works. I will suggest that by carefully considering how issues of faith, hope, and love are played out in Houellebecq's novels – with a focus on *The Possibility of an Island* – we can see the beginnings of a post-secular and post-capitalist account of these virtues. The theoretical implications of such an investigation are considerable: rather than be forced to focus on a giant and perhaps ill-fated (at least in the short term) ontological struggle between capitalism and Christianity, a shift in focus to the theological virtues allows us to imagine what a religious form of life that would be resilient in a changing cultural climate might look like.

The Theological Virtues

Despite the recent resurgence of interest in the virtues amongst both secular and religious ethicists, few have focused on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.⁵ One of the exceptions is Richard Rorty, who has recently offered a secularized discussion of the theological virtues.⁶ Rorty defines “romance,” one of the key terms in the conceptual vocabulary of his later work, as the “fuzzy overlap of faith, hope, and love.” He suggests that it is “hard to distinguish” the three theological virtues. They all manifest themselves in collective endeavors such as trade unions, religious congregations, and families. In these endeavors, there is love for the organization, faith that it will lead to beneficial future possibilities, and hope directed at achieving these possibilities. All such endeavors are small versions of the larger project of improving the human condition.

Rorty suggests that we read *The Communist Manifesto* and the New Testament as products (and teachers) of the virtue of hope rather than as documents making specific predictions about what will happen in the future. Loving communities have faith in these documents, and that conjunction of faith, hope, and love into “romance” is what is desirable according to Rorty.

When the theological virtues are conflated, as Rorty has done, they lose their import. Their punch comes from the distinctive conjunction of the three separate virtues. This is a point made by Augustine’s *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, a handbook that Augustine wrote summarizing much Christian doctrine organized around the theological virtues. Augustine describes his *Enchiridion* as a short treatise on the “proper mode of worshipping God.”⁷ He then quickly proceeds to explain, “God should be worshipped in faith, hope, and love.”⁸ The centrality of the theological virtues for Augustine is clear: having these three dispositions of character is what makes one religious. Further, they are what is sought in religion. People looking for faith, hope, and love turn to religion because they see that religious people are faithful, hopeful, and loving.

Augustine proceeds to offer a nuanced examination of the relationship between the three virtues. You cannot hope for what you do not believe in, but you can believe in what you do not hope for. You cannot hope for eternal life if you do not believe in it, but you can believe in hell without hoping to spend eternity in it, to use Augustine’s example. In general, faith deals with both good and bad things from the past, present, and future, while hope deals with only good things and only with the future. You can have faith that God created the world, that Adam sinned, and that the end times are imminent, but you

cannot hope for things that already are the case in the present or that used to be the case in the past unless you wish them to be the case in the future. And it would be nonsensical to hope for something bad.

Love is the greatest of the three theological virtues, according to Augustine.⁹ The more loving a person is, the better a person she is. You cannot tell how good a person is based on how much faith she has or how much she hopes. You can only tell based on how much she loves. Yet love is intimately – indeed, inextricably – linked with faith and hope: “The man who has not love believes in vain, even though his beliefs are true; and hopes in vain, even though the objects of his hope are a real part of true happiness.”¹⁰ The three theological virtues are needed together to make a truly religious person. Faith and hope alone are not enough. They must be complemented by love.

“Small Oases Warmed by Love”

Keeping in mind the discussion of faith, hope, and love offered by Augustine, let us turn now to Michel Houellebecq’s most recent novel. Although *The Possibility of an Island* continues to exhibit the interests and style for which Houellebecq is best known – a poetic yet strangely scientific prose with interjected details à la Brett Easton Ellis; inflammatory remarks and seemingly unsympathetic characters; and graphic yet elegantly flat descriptions of sexual activity – the novel directly explores religious themes touched on only peripherally in Houellebecq’s earlier novels.

The core problematic of *The Possibility of an Island* was introduced in Houellebecq’s breakthrough novel, *The Elementary Particles*. In that work, we are told, “In the midst of nature’s barbarity, human beings sometimes (rarely) succeed in creating

small oases warmed by love. Small, exclusive, enclosed spaces governed only by love and shared subjectivity.”¹¹ These “enclosed spaces” are exactly what the title of the newest novel refers to: the (tragic) conflict driving the plot is the protagonists’ struggle to confirm, discredit, or simply grapple with the possibility that such spaces might exist in a world that has unconditionally surrendered to capitalism.

The Possibility of an Island is (literary) science fiction. Alternating chapters tell the story of Daniel, a successful comedian living in contemporary Europe, and Daniel’s 24th and 25th clones, centuries in the future. Yet the tone is more one of prophecy than of science fiction, complete with Biblical resonances which are striking and unavoidable. The first line intones, “Welcome to eternal life, my friends,” and proceeds to ask, “Who, among you, deserves eternal life?” The book is divided into two “Commentary of Daniel” segments, and the alternating chapters are numbered like Bible chapters, for example, “Daniel 33.5.” Characters search for eternal life, a messiah figure dies and is brought back to life, and a church structure develops. The “Commentaries” are punctuated with exclamations – for example, “Fear what I say” – accentuating their prophetic tone.

The contemporary strand of the novel follows the life and career of Daniel, a comedian whose “edgy” material takes advantage of the postmodern taste for pushing boundaries. A typical joke from his routine: “Do you know what they call the fat stuff around the vagina?” “No.” “The woman.”¹² The show he considers “the pinnacle of my career” is billed as *We Prefer the Palestinian Orgy Sluts*. He directs a parodic pornographic film titled *Munch on My Gaza Strip (My Huge Jewish Settler)* which is billed as “100% hateful” and features fights between “Allah’s vermin,” “circumcised

fleas,” and “Crabs from the Cunt of Mary.” Transgression does not subvert capitalism in this world. It sells more tickets.

The Possibility of an Island is about the difficult and perhaps ultimately futile, though nonetheless worthwhile, quest for escape from the crude barbarity of nature. This barbarity was smoothed over and covered up through the history of civilization until, in the contemporary world, it is again unmasked through the triumph of capitalism exemplified – and catalyzed – by comedy. Capitalism, on Houellebecq’s account, throws us back into our animal nature, makes us brutal competitors with each other, vying for the fulfillment of our pleasures. The weak quickly lose out to the strong; the old quickly lose out to the young. This is the appeal of eternal life: to be forever young, forever in one’s prime, and, most of all, to be taken away from the order of (mortal) nature. Around this desire for eternal life, this desire to exceed human existence as a biological animal, are the knotted virtues of faith, hope, and love as manifest in Houellebecq’s prose.

While it might have appeared – for instance, to Milbank – from Houellebecq’s earlier work that what Houellebecq had to say about eroticism was simply that, in late capitalism, it becomes totally commodified like everything else (like all forms of pleasure, from food to holiday travel to neighborly greetings), eroticism receives a rather more complex treatment in *The Possibility of an Island*. Certainly, Houellebecq is describing a world of commodified desire and, in some respects, endorsing it (for example, Daniel, with whom Houellebecq seems to identify, is surprised not at prostitution but at the fact that there are some women who are not as yet on the market). Yet Houellebecq also seems to be saying something more.

Consider the poem that Marie22, one of the cloned Daniels' electronic interlocutors, sends him in an instant message (7/13):

I am alone like a silly cunt

With my

Cunt

The first line makes sense in terms of a story of the commodification of the erotic. Each person is absurdly reduced to their (sexualized) reproductive organs which can give and receive pleasure. But the final line, the final word, "Cunt [*con*]," has a piercing effect. In its starkness it is no longer erotic. It is an isolated bit of the formerly erotic which reveals, in the poignancy of its isolation, the confounding extreme to which its author, Marie22, alone, has been pushed. She is no longer "like a silly cunt," one of a group of people, a type. Rather, she is alone, existentially, just one thing. That thing, which she is "with" in an overwhelming sense, is her "Cunt." Through its piercing repetition, her transformed identity, her new name, offers up the opaque possibility of something beyond the commodified. In the world of "neohumans" where almost all interaction is digital, the picture that Daniel24 receives on his computer monitor of Marie22's "pussy" is "jerky, pixilated, but strangely *real*" (6/12).¹³ It breaks through the atomized world.

Indeed, sexual relations form for Daniel a certain anchor in the world, something to keep him grounded and keep him going. Reflecting to himself, he acknowledges that he "probably placed too much importance on sexuality" but "the only place in the world where I felt good was snug in the arms of a woman, snug inside her vagina... the simple

fact that I could be in there, and feel good, already constituted sufficient reason for prolonging this dismal journey” (75/109). In the arms of the woman he loves, everything is forgotten. It is “a miracle” (218/316) – though as we will soon see, Houellebecq’s view is rather more complicated than these statements may suggest.

It is important to note the dramatic though perhaps unexpected difference between the fiction of Michel Houellebecq and the fiction and theory of Georges Bataille.¹⁴ For Bataille, eroticism is a means of escape from the capitalist-ordered world. Eroticism allows one to access another world, a world in which everything is amorphous and connected rather than divided and individuated. As Bataille writes, “In bed next to a girl he loves, he forgets that he does not know why he is himself instead of the body he touches.”¹⁵ Bataille suggests that eroticism and “states of excitation” more generally are like “toxic states” that can poison the capitalist order governed by rational utility.¹⁶ Eroticism offers the possibility of “liberation” through mobilizing “unreal regions of the infinite” to challenge that capitalist order.¹⁷ The ecstatic, the erotic, is never possible to assimilate to that rational order. It remains always heterogeneous.

When Houellebecq writes of the way that “individuality fissures” and “a different order of perception” is attained (119/174), he sounds remarkably similar to Bataille. After spending his first night with Esther, Daniel is transported to “another world” (127/184). But Houellebecq thinks that sexual liberation is impossible. This, he explains, is because there will always be a short circuit, an overload of desire. In postmodernity there is a dual movement in which desires increase and simultaneously become increasingly difficult to fulfill. Demand goes up and supply goes down. Something must break. The object around which the desire is symbolically, and often

literally, focused breaks out of the order of nature from the strain on the system and reveals a supernatural reality (hence: Marie22's "cunt"). Yet at the same time this supernatural possibility is just a decoy; it carries with it no real significance.¹⁸ The result is that Houellebecq has an ultimately much more cynical (perhaps the negative connotations are unfair) view of sex than Bataille: "Women give an impression of eternity, as though their pussy were connected to mysteries – as though it were a tunnel opening onto the essence of the world, when in fact it is just a hole for dwarves, fallen into disrepair" (6/12).

The Love of Two Women and a Dog

There are two loves in Daniel's life. He has an intellectual bond with his second wife, Isabelle. They are "in love." With his final female companion, Esther, the bond of the relationship is physical. For Esther, a young, modern woman, being "in love" is passé. Where Daniel's relationship with Isabelle seems quite ordinary, even somewhat boring, his relationship with Esther is passionate and unrequited. From the moment he met Esther, he knew, "I was going to love her violently, without caution or hope of return" (121/176-7). Each time he finds that he has no voicemail messages from Esther, he is "seized" with "the violence of the disappointment" (129-30/188). He knows that his love would likely kill him. Note here the emphasis on mortality in contrast to the possibility of eternal life – a theme we will turn to below.

We learn little about any substantive conversations that might take place between Daniel and Esther. But we do learn that Daniel is happy, that he feels "intense happiness." This happiness occurs when he is having sex with Esther, "insider her." The

moments during which he is happy because of her “fused” into his whole life as his life is inflected by her presence. Unlike Isabelle, with her intellectual (though translucent) bond with Daniel, Esther was “basically only good for fucking” (152/219). This was part of her character, her personality, and her generation. Houellebecq describes how, for her generation, capitalism was “a natural habit, in which she moved with the grace that characterized all the actions in her life” (133/192). She thinks only in terms of individuals, never in terms of collectives. It is the capitalist waters in which Esther so naturally swam that made it impossible for her to reciprocate Daniel’s love for her.

A curious aspect of *The Possibility of an Island* is the extensive discussion of Daniel’s relationship with Fox, his dog. This relationship contrasts sharply with Daniel’s relationships with the two women he purportedly loves: “The advantage of having a dog for company lies in the fact that it is possible to make him happy; he demands such simple things, his ego is so limited. Possibly, in a previous era, women found themselves in a comparable situation” (5/11). Daniel’s difficult relationships with the modern woman – like Esther, but also career-oriented Isabelle – are contrasted with his relationship with both his dog and imagined pre-capitalist woman.

When Fox joins Daniel and his second wife, Daniel finds in him “unconditional love” of a sort quite different than he had ever experienced before. The tenderness between Daniel and Fox is described like that between spouses or between parents and children:

[H]e likes me to take him in my arms, and rest like that, bathed in sunshine, his eyes closed, his head placed on my knees, in a happy half-sleep. We sleep

together, and every morning is a festival of licks and scratches from his little paws; it is an obvious joy for him to be reunited with life and daylight... his nature in itself contains the possibility of happiness (52/77-78)

Here, in the description of Fox, we find the sort of happiness to which Daniel aspires but which he is unable to achieve. He is not like Fox. He is a human being, beyond the order of the purely natural world and yet still of it. He is not capable of unconditional love although he is capable of appreciating it and longing for it. Fox can be happy, and be happy for eternity, because he is immune to the sort of existential crises that plagues Daniel – and all of Houellebecq's protagonists. He is unaware of the difficulty of the world, and this is why for Fox love is unequivocal but for Daniel love is always equivocal.

This equivocal understanding of love motivates Houellebecq's understanding of the virtue of hope. For people, unlike for dogs, Daniel concludes that happiness is only possible if unconditional love is possible. Based on his experiences, it might seem as though Daniel's logic would lead him to give up hope of happiness. But by Fox he is reminded that unconditional love is possible, it is just operating in a different order of nature than he is: "Through these dogs we pay homage to love, and to its possibility. What is a dog but a machine for loving?" (131/190-1). Love is operating amongst the animal realm – and, he seems to hope, amongst the religious.

Houellebecq does not offer a perfect exemplar of the virtue of love. Rather, he offers partial examples which can be pieced together. Daniel's relationship with Esther points to the other-worldly possibilities of loving. But Daniel's relationship with Fox

reminds us of the material yet pure form of loving. In both cases, Houellebecq is talking about love, not about the sort of eroticism that entranced Bataille. And both cases involve an element of tragedy (perhaps better: mortality). Both instances of love are, ultimately, unsuccessful. But this does not cause Daniel to lose hope in love. Daniel has confidence that he will eventually find love. This is something he “knew, had always known” (119/174). We see Houellebecq pair hope and love. Elsewhere, Daniel ponders, “love without hope is ... something painful certainly, but something that never generates the same sense of closeness, the same sensitivity to the intonations of the other” (58/86). Daniel claims that the first time he feels hope is when, depressed after having lost his (final) love, Esther, his dog Fox dies. He calls the Elohimites (the religious sect with which he has become affiliated and which is working on cloning technology) who assure him that Fox will be guaranteed immortality along with him. Daniel then claims to finally understand the attraction of the Elohimites and, “for the first time, I felt an emotion that, although still obscure, distant, and veiled, resembled hope” (270/390).

Faith, Hope, and a Scientific Sect

Hope has a central but paradoxical role in *The Possibility of an Island*. It is a necessity, but it is at the same time an impossibility. Daniel is too jaded to hope, yet he entangles himself with a religious sect which makes hope its *raison d'être*. He experiences discontent in his loves, yet he holds out the possibility that he will eventually love successfully. Daniel can at once be “in favor of immortality,” of eternal life, but at the same time think “it wouldn't be for me” (190/276). Eternal life – as achieved through the cloning research sponsored by and central to the Elohimites – is described by Daniel

as “a hope, the only hope in fact” (190/276). This seeming tension can perhaps be resolved by understanding the hope offered by eternal life procured through technological means as a false hope. But there is another hope, a virtue of hope that has its basis in lived human experience and that is memorialized in love relations.

Although Daniel at times seems to be without hope, Isabelle, in contrast, loses hope entirely and becomes a morphine addict. After her separation from Daniel – which she initiated, realizing that her aging would inevitably lead him to look beyond her to younger women – she stops doing the activities she enjoys. She no longer dances, no longer plays sports, no longer swims: “I do an injection in the morning, one in the evening, and in between I look at the sea, that’s all... I want nothing” (96/139). This is the face of hopelessness: human life reduced to mere biological existence.

After Isabelle left him, during his first encounter with Esther, Daniel starts to tell Esther, “I’ve lost faith” (123/179). At this point, Daniel’s flirtations with hope are still continuing. He is still associating with the Elohimites, and he has just proclaimed his belief that he will achieve true love in his lifetime. As Augustine noted, hope is about the future while faith can be about the present. Daniel is convinced that something positive will happen to him in the future, but the present looks bleak. Esther responds by fondling him: “she gently pressed my cock between her fingers” (123/179). In a later sexual encounter, Daniel describes how the “miracle” of their first sexual intercourse repeated “as strongly as on the first day, and I believed again... that it was going to last for eternity” (218/316). For Daniel, physical intimacy restores and buttresses faith, concretizing hope and love. Indeed, Houellebecq writes of faith as a prerequisite for (physical) love. When Daniel briefly reunites with Isabelle, the woman who loved him

intellectually but not physically, she makes a final attempt to please him sexually. But her efforts are in vain: “she didn’t believe in it, and anyway, to do this kind of thing properly you need a minimum of faith...” (250/362).

Daniel²⁵ makes mystical and opaque references to the “Future Ones” who are to come and in whom Daniel²⁵ believes. It is never clear exactly what this could be referring to, but the Future Ones are definitely distinct from both humans and neohumans. And, they are ethical – or at least their coming has an ethical valence. “Goodness, compassion, fidelity, and altruism therefore remain for us impenetrable mysteries... It is on the solution to this problem that the coming, or not, of the Future Ones depends. I believe in the coming of the Future Ones” (53/79). Daniel²⁵ notes that these ethical qualities are found in Fox, his dog. But that is not enough. Their mystery must be unraveled for humans. It is not clear whether the mystery can be unraveled. But one must stake out a position. One must either believe in the possibility of goodness or believe that there is no goodness. Houellebecq, aligned with the Daniels, takes the former option.

But Daniel remains stupefied at the faith of *hoi polloi*. When the lay Elohimites unquestioningly accept the surreptitious switch of the Elohimite Prophet for the Prophet’s son, Daniel is amazed. It would be easy to contrast the faithful Elohimite followers with the faithless, skeptical Daniel. But something subtler is at play. Perhaps the more proper contrast is that between the faith the Elohimites have in the material world and human technological mastery over it as opposed to Daniel’s faith which does not have a worldly object. This parallels the contrast between Houellebecq and Bataille. Transcendence is achieved for the latter, not the former, through ascent (or: descent) to maximally erotic

practices, whereas for Houellebecq the transcendence involved in erotics is one-off, located at the point of short circuit. In other words, Houellebecq's account is in line with Augustine's contention that faith and hope deal with things that are not possible to see rather than aspects of the material world.¹⁹

In Augustine's handbook on faith, hope, and love, his discussion of belief begins by considering belief in natural phenomena.²⁰ No amount of scientific investigation, no amount of exploration and systematization of the natural world will result in properly religious belief. For the Christian, it is sufficient to believe that God is the cause of the created world. That is the proper emphasis; focus on the laws of physics, and belief therein, will likely lead one astray.

Religious belief and organized religion are at the center of *The Possibility of an Island*. But Augustine would find the explicitly religious belief of the Elohimite sect to have the wrong emphasis, for it is belief that tries to ground itself in the material world. Daniel, in the boredom of his retirement, becomes interested in the Elohimites – a sect which comes off as a rather low-brow version of Scientology. They believe that the human race was founded by multiple “gods” who are material beings, aliens, rather than supernatural creatures. They are working to give their members immortality through scientific research and cloning. The materially-concerned side of the “religion” is always in view from Daniel's “VIP” perspective. Leaders of the organization are more focused on logistics (whether they be organizational or scientific) than in spiritual fervor.

There are clear Christian resonances in some of the beliefs and practices of the Elohimites. In some ways, it seems as if the Elohimite religion is Christianity made accessible for a 21st century world, materialized. When asked how many of the Elect

there will be, the Elohimite Prophet responds, “The Elect will be whoever wishes for it in his or her heart... and has behaved accordingly” (87/126). But at the same time, the prophet himself remains utterly earthy. When Daniel, welcomed as a V.I.P. by the Elohimites, meets the Prophet for the first time, the Prophet is wearing “jeans and a ‘Lick my balls’ T-shirt” (89/129).

The need for (invented) religion and ritual has been a persistent theme in Houellebecq’s work. In *The Elementary Particles*, Houellebecq gestures towards the sort of invented religion he thinks is necessary. One of the protagonists of that novel, Michel, ponders, “Life should be simple, ...something that could be lived as a collection of small, endlessly repeated rituals. Perhaps somewhat empty rituals, but they gave you something to believe in. A life without risk, without drama. But life was not like that.”²¹ Michel lives in an ‘atomised’ world, a world stricken of rituals, of the significance of time understood in any way other than purely quantitatively, to be added and divided, to be recorded on a time clock for the purposes of worker compensation. He longs for substance with which to fill that time, the substance of ritual that would change time from having a quantitative to a qualitative character.

The introduction of these rituals is somehow, rather mysteriously, linked with love. The paragraph expressing Michel’s longing for a simple life characterized by ritual begins, “He himself wanted nothing more than to love. He asked for nothing; nothing in particular, anyway. Life should be simple...”²² Somehow, Michel’s longing to love is transformed into his longing for a life of “endlessly repeated rituals” which in turn is equated with a “life without risk,” all of which are decreed impossible because “life was not like that.” The transformation of love into ritual is effected by the vacuous object of

Michel's love. He wants to love, but he does not desire anything – not anything “in particular.” Perhaps the opaque connections effected here can be clarified when we recall how Houellebecq describes love as characterizing the “small oases” that humans create “in the midst of nature's barbarity.” There is at once a desire to love which is also the desire to find an oasis, an island; the desire to hope for something stable.

That fantasized stability can be created, personally, through love, or, institutionally, through ritual – even “empty” ritual. The characters with whom Houellebecq is aligned are dismissive of hippies because hippies consider religion an individual experience rather than what religion truly is, “a purely social activity about rites and rituals, ceremonies and rules. According to Auguste Comte, the sole purpose of religion is to bring humanity to a state of perfect unity.”²³ Unity is the oasis, the island hoped for; it can be achieved through love (real love, not “liberated” pseudo-love advocated by hippies) or it can be achieved by ritual activity.

Yet Houellebecq has his other protagonist in *The Elementary Particles* respond: “Auguste Comte yourself! ... As soon as people stop believing in life after death, religion is impossible.”²⁴ This is precisely the problematic that is explored in *The Possibility of an Island*. Churches are rapidly emptying and the only way to create a religion that people will return to is to create a religion that promises eternal life – in this case, through scientific means, through cloning. Once the Elohimists' ideas are institutionalized, once they build a bureaucratic apparatus to further their enterprise, they (literally, in the novel) buy up churches and begin to fill them with believers again. They introduce new rituals to accompany their beliefs; they play the role that the “old fashioned” Christian church is no longer able to play.²⁵

Immortality and Bare Life

The Elohimite religion offers the possibility of overcoming death. Deterioration is an inescapable reality of the world of *The Possibility of an Island*. We follow Daniel as he recognizes himself beginning to age. His second wife leaves the youth magazine which she ran. She loses interest in physical intimacy and, recognizing her predicament, separates from Daniel, resigning herself to a life of drug addiction and, finally, suicide. She can no longer compete; she can no longer run with the pack – and that is what is called for in the contemporary world where all is commodified. Daniel notes that, in the postmodern world, all forms of sexual perversity, from swinging to zoophilia, are acceptable – all, that is, except love for the old. Even once the Elohimite cloning project is successful, the neohuman clones still deteriorate before they die and are reincarnated.

At the end of the day, both Daniel and his clones abandon their aspirations for eternal life. Or, rather, they find something hollow in the version of eternal life offered by the success of the Elohimites. Despite having achieved eternal life, “time seems brief” (5/11). The process of achieving eternal life has taken away the possibility of genuine human emotion, of joy and sorrow, of terror and ecstasy. Neohumans cannot understand what it is to laugh, although they can recognize its physical characteristics, its “expressive distortion.” Even more significantly, they cannot comprehend love. Although they can understand copulation, in humans as in animals, and they can understand “the unbearable pain of emotional isolation,” they cannot understand how it might be possible for there to be some connection between these two phenomena (311/449). Moreover, and consequently, neohumans lack the capacity to have religious

feelings. They cannot understand that “objectless frenzy that man called *mystical ecstasy*” (31/44, emphasis in the original).

The novel concludes with Daniel²⁵ alone, without his dog, without the women he has loved, without his home. The final words are Daniel’s reflection to himself, “Life was real.” This life, bare life, mortal life, is what remains when the illusions of eternal life achievable on earth are eliminated.²⁶ For life understood in this way, the theological virtues play a crucial role. One cannot live once what has been hoped for has been achieved, when one no longer needs faith and when one no longer loves. Love is “inevitably fatal” because love is part of life. Mortals love and are loved. It is an aspect of our mortality.

The love advocated by the Elohimites is false love. The Elohimite Prophet taught that love should be unpossessive, that one should rejoice in seeing the woman one loves have pleasure with other men. Despite the Prophet’s teachings, despite his encouragement of free love amongst the devotees of his sect, lay Elohimites remained atomized. Even at the church-wide convention, most members remained in “isolation and silence,” keeping to themselves and ignoring their neighbors. In the future world, neohumans rarely leave their rooms.

The theological virtues, for Houellebecq, are character traits that are uniquely human. Both animals and neohumans are unable to properly love, hope, and believe. It is only in that difficult position of the human, filled with existential angst, never abandoned for an easy answer, that life can truly be lived. Life truly lived is equivocal: the virtues of faith, hope, and love are never perfected, are always a work in progress.

We cannot achieve these virtues; we can only “fail towards” them, to borrow a felicitous phrase from Gillian Rose.²⁷

Put another way, the reformulation of the theological virtues offered by Houellebecq is also a reformulation of the concept of freedom. Both the postmodern capitalist culture of the world in which Daniel lives and the Elohimite religion elevate freedom. For the Elohimites, it is not possible to be truly free if one is necessarily going to die. Daniel is different. He views himself as a “prehistoric monster” with his “attachments” and “chains” (236/341). Esther, that paragon of postmodern “liberated” capitalism, cannot be bothered with the attachments that love entails. Of such people, Daniel ponders, “[A]t no moment in their lives would they ever know love. They were free” (236/342). It is a lie, he concludes, to think that there could be love in freedom. There can only be love in fusion. But, unlike the fusion described by Bataille, this fusion is not materially achieved through specific worldly practices. It is fantasy, always unseen.

It is interesting to note the seemingly unexemplary death of the first Daniel. After Esther moves to America to pursue her musical career, Daniel gradually loses contact with other people, eventually staying in his bed all day “in a state of great mental emptiness, which was nonetheless painful” (263/381). His obsession with Esther is fueled when she spurns him. He follows her and writes a final letter to her with a “euphoric tone, in which he declared himself confident in their love” (299/432). He finally dies by his own hand. However, in the midst of his ultimate depression, Daniel concludes that he will, “in my heart of hearts, and in the face of all the evidence, believe in love” (280/403). His final poem to Esther concludes (300/433):

And love, where all is easy,
Where all is given in the instant;
There exists in the midst of time
The possibility of an island.

¹ Emily Eakin, “Le Provocateur,” *The New York Times Magazine* (September 10, 2000), accessed at www.nytimes.com; Julian Barnes, “Hate and Hedonism: The Insolent Art of Michel Houellebecq,” *The New Yorker* (July 7, 2003), accessed at www.newyorker.com. In the last few years there have been numerous books and articles written in French about Houellebecq. Particularly notable is the collection of scholarly essays edited by Lucie Clement and Sabine van Wesemael: *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

² For an overview of the controversy, see Michael Karwowski, “Michel Houellebecq: French Novelist for Our Time,” *Contemporary Review* 283:1650 (July 2003), pp. 40-46.

³ On Houellebecq’s supposed “nihilism,” see, for example, Nancy Huston, “Michel Houellebecq: The Ecstasy of Disgust,” *Salmagundi* 152 (Fall 2006), pp. 20-39.

⁴ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 205-206.

⁵ For interesting recent discussion of the theological virtues, particularly with regard to politics, see Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Patrick Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton

University Press, 2005); and Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), pp 160; 205.

Graham Ward's recent remarks on the theological virtues, when viewed from a theological perspective, sound uncomfortably similar to Rorty's. See Ward's "Narrative and Ethics: The Structures of Believing and the Practices of Hope," *Literature & Theology* 20:4 (December 2006), pp. 438-461.

⁷ St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, trans. J. B. Shaw, (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1991), Section 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I-II 62:4.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Section 117.

¹¹ Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. Frank Wynne (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 75 [UK Title: *Atomised*].

¹² Michel Houellebecq, *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), translated by Gavin Bowd as *The Possibility of an Island* (New York: Knopf, 2006), p. 15 (English) / 22 (French). Further references to this work are indicated parenthetically in the same format.

¹³ The numbers after the names indicate which clone the individual is. For example, Marie22 is the 22nd clone of the "real" human Marie.

¹⁴ I elaborate on this point in Chapter 7 of Vincent Lloyd, *Law and Transcendence: On the Unfinished Project of Gillian Rose* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁵ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 6. Cf. Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

¹⁶ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 128.

¹⁷ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 134.

¹⁸ Cf. Slavoj Žižek on the Lacanian “object a,” for example, his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

¹⁹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Section 8.

²⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Section 9.

²¹ Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, p. 100.

²² Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, p. 100.

²³ Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, p. 212.

²⁴ Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, p. 212.

²⁵ Moreover, Houellebecq recognizes this as a peculiarly (post)modern predicament.

Earlier, he writes, “demotic happiness” was achieved through “the pleasure of constituting a functional organism, one that was adequate, conceived with the purpose of accomplishing a discrete series of tasks – and these tasks, through repetition, constituted a discrete series of days” (5/11). This remark resonates with the point that Catherine Pickstock makes so eloquently about the lost liturgical character of the Middle Ages. See her *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

²⁶ By “bare life” I mean to allude more to the work of Michel Henry than to the work of Giorgio Agamben. Indeed, I suspect that a reading of Henry along with Houellebecq

would be surprisingly fecund. Of particular note is their shared interest in Schopenhauer.

See, for instance, Henry's *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993) and his *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

²⁷ Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 53.